

Degree of Vulnerability

In the first category of insecure countries, skewed income distribution limits access of low-income groups to sufficient amounts of food despite adequate food supplies on the national level. Twenty-seven of the 66 countries have adequate aggregate food supplies, but in 12 of them, skewed income distribution limits purchasing power for lower income groups, thereby precluding adequate diets. In these countries, improved agricultural performance can reduce income inequality. Most poor live in rural areas with limited access to resources such as land or credit. In these countries, food insecurity in the low-income group is expected to continue unless programs to create employment and increase productivity of the poor are adopted. Increasing investment to improve market infrastructure will also help markets work, increasing returns to farming communities.

The second group includes 27 countries that are moderately food insecure, where projected food consumption represents 75 to 99 percent of nutritional requirements. Most of the countries in this group are in Sub-Saharan Africa, but factors contributing to their food insecurity vary. Some countries are experiencing civil unrest; others have shown progress in their agricultural performance and may be able to sustain the recent growth momentum. For example, the Congo's civil unrest during the last 2 years has displaced populations, adversely affecting food production and hindering marketing activities. This factor, plus flooding from El Niño in early 1998 that damaged houses, infrastructure, and crops, led to higher food prices and food insecurity in many parts of the country. On the other hand, Mozambique is reaping the benefits of sustained peace. Production has risen steadily for the last 6 years, and grain output in 1997 was roughly three times higher than the average output of the late 1980's.

The common characteristic of this group, however, is the large contribution of domestic food production to food consumption. Since these countries have been unable to adopt new technologies to increase productivity, labor remains the principal input in production, encouraging large families. With slow growth in domestic food production, these countries use commercial imports to fill food gaps. Historically, imports in these countries were supported by external assistance, which helped reduce the financial burden of food imports. With the decline in external assistance, a

larger share of foreign exchange availability must be allocated to food imports. However, any increase in spending on food imports will crowd out spending on essential raw materials and spare parts, raising concern over the long-term economic health of these countries.

The 12 countries in the third group are the most food insecure, and all but 2 are in Sub-Saharan Africa. For these countries, average food consumption is projected to fall to less than 75 percent of the nutritional requirement in 2008. A common characteristic among these countries is that they have been or are currently faced with political problems. While the projections of production and imports did not represent a decline from the historical period, population growth alone will severely deteriorate their food security situation because of their already weak position.

The political problems of these countries reinforce long-term trends in poverty, food insecurity, and a breakdown of social structure. Consequently, events such as drought, disease (human or livestock), or floods can easily trigger acute food shortages and famine. For these countries, political stability and better policies are essential for improving food security.

Fifteen of the study countries fall into the fourth group, projected to be food secure because their consumption, both on average and by individual income group, will be higher than the minimum nutritional requirements.

In summary, Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa are projected to face a deteriorating nutritional situation. In Asia, however, the deterioration is negligible, and the region's current consumption is higher than that of Sub-Saharan Africa. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the deterioration is measurable, and consumption has a lower base value. In this region, only the highest income group is projected to consume more than the minimum nutritional requirement, compared with the top three groups in Asia. The severity of the situation in Sub-Saharan Africa is confirmed by projected changes in the distribution gap. With the exception of Sub-Saharan Africa, for all the regions covered in this study, this gap declines or increases negligibly during the projection period. For Sub-Saharan Africa, however, the distribution gap jumps more than 50 percent over the next decade. This statistic alone is a strong indicator of the intensity of the region's food insecurity problem.